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ABSTRACT

Learning disabilities (LD) in adults, which can include problems in visual perception, auditory perception, intersensory development, motor skills, or directional abilities produce such academic problems as difficulty in thinking in an orderly and logical way and in dealing with time concepts. Accommodations for LD college students may include using taperecording and notetaking services and role playing social situations. Counseling techniques should emphasize information, positive reinforcement, and specific feedback. Support groups of other LD students may be helpful. (CL)

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Counseling and Accomodating
the Student
with Learning Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Learning disabilities are described and defined. The effects of these handicaps on academic performance and social skills are discussed. Various types of reasonable accommodations are listed. Then, useful counseling strategies for learning disabled students are proposed.

INTRODUCTION

Learning disabled adults receive inaccurate information from their senses and/or have trouble processing that information. Like static on the radio or a bad TV picture the information becomes garbled as it travels from the eye, ear, or skin to the brain.

This inaccurate sensory information (sometimes called perceptual problems) leads to problems with academic work. The student might have difficulty reading, writing, speaking or listening. Either these skills have not been learned, have been learned after heroic work, or have been learned poorly.

TYPES OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

Visual perceptual problems

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Trouble taking information in through the sense of sight and/or processing that information.

1. Visual figure-ground problems. Trouble seeing a specific image within a competing background, finding a face in a crowd, finding keys on a crowded desk, picking out one line of print from the other lines in a book. People with this problem cannot see things that others can see; to them, the keys on the crowded desk are not there.

2. Visual sequencing problems. Trouble seeing things in the correct order; for instance, seeing letters or numbers reversed, seeing two cans reversed on a shelf of cans. The person with this problem actually sees the word incorrectly. He sees "was" instead of "saw".

3. Visual discrimination problems. Trouble seeing the difference between two similar objects, such as the letters "v" and "u", "e" and "c", the difference between two shades of one color or two similar types of leaves. The person with this problem sees the two similar objects as alike.

Auditory perceptual problems

Trouble taking information in through the sense of hearing and/or processing that information. People with this problem frequently hear inaccurately. A sequencing or discrimination error can totally change the meaning of an entire message. For example, one might hear "I ran to the car" instead of "I rented the car." People with auditory handicaps frequently do not hear unaccented syllables. They may hear "formed" instead of "performed," "seven" instead of "seventy". These are some types of auditory perceptual handicaps:

1. Auditory figure-ground problems. Trouble hearing a sound over background noise; for example, being unable to hear the telephone ring when one is listening to the radio or hearing someone talk at a party when music is playing.

2. Auditory Sequencing problems. Trouble hearing sounds in the correct order; for example, hearing "nine-four" instead of "four-nine"; hearing "treats" instead of "street"; hearing music garbled because the notes are perceived out of order.

3. Auditory discrimination problems. Trouble telling the difference between similar sounds, such as "th" and "f" and "m" or "n", hearing "seventeen" instead of "seventy", hearing an angry rather than a joking tone of voice.

Intersensory problems

Trouble using two senses at once or associating two senses. For instance, not realizing that the letter "D", which is seen, is the same as the sound "D", when it is spoken; being unable to feel someone tap you on the shoulder while reading; being unable to listen to conversation and drive at the same time.

Motor problems

Trouble moving one's body efficiently to achieve a certain goal. These are some motor problems:

1. Perceptual-motor problems. Trouble performing a task requiring coordination because of inaccurate information received through the senses. This may result in clumsiness, difficulty in participating in simple sports, awkward or stiff movements.

2. Visual-motor problems. Trouble seeing something and then doing it: copying something off a blackboard, throwing something at a target, learning a dance step by watching the teacher.

3. Auditory-motor problems. Trouble hearing something and then doing it: following verbal directions, dancing to a rhythmic beat, taking notes in a lecture.

Directional problems

Trouble automatically distinguishing left from right; learning North, South, East, West; learning the layout of a large symmetrical building.

ACADEMIC DIFFICULTIES

Learning disabilities can make academic achievement difficult. Learning to read is not easy for people with visual perceptual problems or difficulty coordinating what they see with what they hear. Even when these students learn to read, it is often at a low level, so it may take them a long time to complete their assignments. Writing requires fine motor skills which some learning disabled students do not have.

Informing oneself through lectures requires good auditory perception. Sometimes the student must behave inappropriately in class to cope with his learning disabilities. For example, hyperactive students may have to leave the class to walk up and down the hall. Some students will need to cut out their visual sense in order to listen. They will close their eyes, causing their teachers to think they are asleep. Taking notes may not be possible for pupils with auditory-motor or fine motor problems.

Hands-on experience requires good perception. For example, a person with a directional handicap may not turn knobs and switches the right way. Visual perception is often necessary to measure chemicals in a beaker. Pouring liquids also requires visual-motor skills.

Perceptual problems often effect the student's cognitive abilities. For example, visual and auditory sequencing problems can cause difficulty thinking in an orderly, logical way. A person, with this problem might tend to jump to conclusions. Or a student with visual and auditory discrimination problems may have difficulty distinguishing between two like concepts such as socialism and communism. Sometimes, short-term memory is affected. This is because information must be perceived properly before it can be remembered.

Some learning disabled people have trouble with the concept of time. They do not feel the passage of time in a normal way and may have difficulty estimating how long it will take them to achieve a task or have trouble getting to a certain place by a certain hour.

NECESSARY ACCOMMODATIONS

How can the handicapped student service program help the learning disabled student? First, remember that learning disabilities are a handicap specifically mentioned under Section 504. Thus, learning disabled students need and deserve similar accommodation as those received by students with physical handicaps.

Tape recording classes

This may be necessary for students who cannot take notes or who have difficulty in auditory perception. If a professor is worried about the student misusing a tape, he can prepare notices for the student to sign that declare that the tapes are for the pupil's own use only and that they may not be utilized for any other purposes.

Notetakers

A student who takes good notes can be asked to take notes with carbon paper or lend his notes to the student with a handicap.

Arranging for the student to have more time

Most copying skills for learning disabilities take extra time. The student may have to check and recheck his work for errors. It takes him longer to write and read. It may be necessary to help the student find extra time to study. For example, you can help him get his reading materials and some assignments in advance, so he can prepare for next year's courses over the summer. Or perhaps professors can be convinced to extend the deadline for a student. Some learning disabled students try to take only one course per semester.

Accommodations in testing-

Some learning disabled students with difficulty writing will need a person to write the answers for them or may need to speak into a tape recorder. Others will need the examination read to them. Tests for learning disabled students should be printed clearly with dark ink, so the letters are easy to see. Double negatives are confusing for students with directional handicaps. Computer cards are difficult for some students with motor problems, since they have a hard time keeping the pencil marks within the lines. Also, students with visual tracking problems may fail this type of test due to putting answer "1" in answer space "2" and answer "2" in answer space "3" and so on. Many students can take tests normally, but need extra time to complete them, because of their slow reading and writing abilities.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

It may be difficult to convince the professors to provide accommodations for learning disabled students. They may think the student is making up the handicap in order to gain a privilege. It is necessary to educate the faculty on learning disabilities. Some universities provide in-service training. One counseling center writes a letter to professors who will have learning disabled students in their classes. It describes the faculty member's requirements under Section 504.

Academic work is not the only area affected by a learning disability. Many learning disabled adults have trouble meeting people, working with others, and making friends. They do not "fit in" easily. Social skills problems are part of the handicap of learning disabilities. Due to their perceptual problems, learning disabled individuals may have trouble understanding others. A person who cannot visually discriminate between light and dark colors will also be unable to tell the difference between a happy and a sarcastic smile. A person unable to discriminate between a "v" and a "b" sound may not be able to tell the difference between joking and questioning voices. People with auditory handicaps work so hard to understand the words of a statement that they may ignore the nonverbal meaning. This confusion can cause learning disabled adults to respond incorrectly.

It is extremely difficult for learning disabled people to pick up the social customs many of their peers take for granted: small talk, entering a circle of people, introducing themselves to strangers. Learning disabled people are in culture shock in their own culture.

It is also difficult for learning disabled people to interact with authority figures such as professors and counselors. Many have not learned the appropriate voice and body language and may make requests too arrogantly or too shyly. Some may have had so many bad experiences with teachers that they may be afraid to ask for special help. It may be useful for a counselor to practice with the student, before he approaches the instructor.

COUNSELING STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Learning disabilities can cause academic and social difficulties. How can these students be counseled? Here are some ideas.

The student needs information about his handicap

Many learning disabled students have been experiencing difficulty all their lives without having any idea of the reason. They ascribe their failure to "not trying", being personally weak, being "crazy" or "stupid." These explanations lead to a low self-image which paralyzes their desire to improve.

This information should be presented clearly

Use both scientific words and common phrases. The student should also learn about his strengths. He should also be given a written record or tape of his diagnosis.

The student needs positive reinforcement

Learning disabled people struggle alone. As they advance, they are not praised. Instead, they are criticized or teased, since they often cannot keep up with their peers. The student deserves this praise because of his struggle against his handicaps.

Acknowledge the difficulty caused by the handicaps

Students with learning disabilities do not get much sympathy, and sometimes they need to complain. Don't confuse ventilation with self-pity.

Here are some good phrases to use: "It really does take a lot of work to overcome these handicaps. I'm impressed that you stick with it and get your studying completed." "It definitely takes more time to listen to your books than to read them. It must be hard to watch the other students enjoying their weekends and evenings when you have to study. But when you graduate, you'll have a better idea of how to really get work done."

Deal with self-pity

Remember that some self-pity is natural in everyone. The student may be able to talk himself out of it. It may be helpful to ask him to speak about something of which he is proud. Ask him to talk about it and give him a lot of positive reinforcement about how wonderful he is.

Talk to the student about his behavior

Don't comment on his emotions, since you don't know what he is feeling. For example, it would be helpful to say, "it sounds like you aren't spending enough hours studying." It would be less helpful to say, "You aren't trying very hard." It would be helpful to say, "Mr. Lynch told me that you spoke to him in a loud, nasty tone of voice when you asked to tape his classes. He thought you didn't show respect for him." It would be less help to say, "You got angry at Mr. Lynch and that's why he didn't let you tape his classes."

Be specific in your feedback

It would be helpful to say, "When your eyes wander all over the room, I feel like you aren't listening to me. Please look at me when I am talking to you." It would be less helpful to say, "Pay attention."

Be honest with yourself about how you react to the student

Some learning disabled people have visible results of their handicaps, such as staring, moving in a disorganized way, or not holding their heads perpendicular. Others work so hard at paying attention and trying to do well that they radiate tension. If you find that a certain student makes you uncomfortable, express your thoughts appropriately to another person. Deal with these feelings. Don't subtly reject the student.

The student may need help organizing his thoughts

Large projects may need to be broken down into many steps. For example, a learning disabled student could be taught to outline a paper, then to work on one subject heading each night. He might need guidance on how much time to schedule for each task.

The student may need help organizing his thoughts. If he takes ten sentences to say what he could say in one sentence, help him think of the main point before he speaks. Interrupt him when he doesn't make sense. Don't let him ramble.

Try to organize support groups of learning disabled students

Since their handicap is invisible, they cannot share good coping skills unless somebody gets them together. They can be taught to give each other positive reinforcement and can help each other study. These self-help groups have proven invaluable on many campuses.

CONCLUSION

As more and more learning disabled students go to college, their handicaps will become more widely known and easier to accommodate. They will become better able to make their contribution to society.

Learning disabled people have many good points. They often over-compensate for their handicaps, turning weaknesses into strengths. Their slightly incorrect perception can lead to looking at the world in a slightly different way. This can make them more creative and better able to solve problems.

With the help of good handicapped student services programs, learning disabled students can become productive professionals.